

Code Official Corner

Obtaining Plans for Existing Buildings

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Obtaining plans to make changes to an existing building can be a challenge. Cities are a great resource to help you find existing commercial building plans as most communities retain and store commercial building plans for the life of the building. When plans are not signed, they are not copyrighted and you should be able to obtain a copy from the municipality. Be careful with these plans, however, and carefully review them for code compliance and accuracy. When plans are signed and sealed they should be more accurate, but they are also copyrighted. This means you may be able to look at the plans, but not obtain a copy.

This is where the challenge comes in. You, as a design professional working for the owner, may need the existing commercial building plans to complete the new drawings for the project you are working on. There are a couple of common ways design professionals deal with this issue.

The first way is to make a request in writing to the design professional, or the design professional's firm, for permission to obtain the plans. Obtaining written permission from the design professional of record, or the firm of record, will allow you to seek permission from a municipality to copy the commercial building plans they have on file. Problems may arise when the design professional of record has passed away, or the firm has gone out of business. In this case, a letter of intent to the city on the use of the plans may be helpful.

The second way is to review the existing commercial building plans at the office in which they are stored and take good notes. Reviewing the plans may prove more difficult than obtaining a copy because you may forget or miss something that was critical on the plan. You may need to return to the municipality and re-examine the plans multiple times which may be both more costly and more time consuming than obtaining a copy of the plans.

So, when making changes to an existing building, use your local municipality. Not only can they help you obtain plans, but they can also answer questions about the existing building. And please help out your fellow design professionals and local code officials who are in need of existing plans. Remember, some day you may be the one looking for the plans.